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## Helpers of Joy

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## Helpers of Joy

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*President Meyer preached the following for the opening of the 2014–2015 academic year.*

Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy, for by faith you stand. (2 Cor 1:24 KJV)

It is my privilege and pleasure to welcome you to Concordia Seminary. I invite you to “Come.” Come with faculty, come with staff, come with other seminarians, come with alumni, come and have here a life-enriching experience. As I start, let me plant in your mind the picture of an aircraft carrier. Come, come with us and come onboard the USS *Concordia*.

Come onboard and experience the depth and height and breadth of following Jesus Christ in the world the way the world is today. Come with us and learn the depth of sin. Some of you will meet Steve, a Christian worker in one of the worst parts of the city. Steve can tell you about a man who gave his daughter to a friend to be prostituted. As she went off, the father whispered in his daughter’s ear, “This will help daddy pay the rent.” The depth of sin and the depth of our own sin, yours and mine! As deep and dark as the ocean is, your sinful heart is deeper and darker. “Who can discern his errors?” (Ps 19:12). That’s why we want you to come with us and experience the height of the good news of Jesus Christ. As the Seminary motto puts it, experience “The Light from Above,” *anthen to phos*. The gospel comes from out of us, from on high, down into the darkness and depths of the world. This precious gospel that brings light and immortality to light emanates from the highest ground on campus, from this chapel. And come with us and experience the breadth of mission; how wide the mission field is! Your experiences in residential field education, institutional modules, vicarage, cross-cultural classes in this country and in the world, should lead you to humility, to realize how precious little we know. But the little we know is precious and we want to share it with the world. So come, come with us, come onboard the *Concordia* as we together experience what it means to follow Jesus Christ in this troubled world.

Over the years I have observed many congregational cultures. Every place has its own culture, its own attitudes, conducts, spoken and unspoken ways of doing things. For example, the family with an abusive parent has a culture, a harmful culture that perpetuates itself from generation to generation. Congregations have their own cultures as well. I was invited once to preach in a church in Illinois. I got there a bit early and walked into the narthex with my alb on my arm. There were two or three small clusters of people in the narthex, *and not one of those people came up and greeted me!* I stood there like a leper holding my white leper’s robe. I started to sense the culture of that congregation and the rest of the morning confirmed my sense. It was a culture that I didn’t want to be in, except that I had to be there to preach. Concordia Seminary has its own culture. It’s not spelled out in the academic catalog, the student handbook or course syllabi. Our culture is not in our mission statement or vision statement or core values, although they should all reflect the culture. Culture is something you sniff out, you sense it, you experience it, and in time you start to reflect it. That’s key. The culture you experience here is a culture that we hope you will engender and grow in the congregations to which the church will one day send you.

How shall we characterize a healthy culture? St. Paul says, “All the promises of God find their yes in Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 1:20). A healthy seminary and a health church have a culture of “yes”! Not “yes” to everything you and I want, not “yes” to all A’s, not “yes” to failing to meet deadlines, not “yes” to a lack of budget discipline. A healthy culture is a culture of “yes” to the promises of God. All the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The promise from Ezekiel 18:20, “The soul who sins shall die” is fulfilled by Jesus Christ in his sacrificial death. The promise of Psalm 118:17, “I shall not die but live,” is fulfilled by Jesus Christ in his resurrection, he the firstfruits of them that sleep. “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act” (Ps 37:5) is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and by his Spirit. And so it goes throughout scripture. All the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The things that you will learn—preaching, teaching, leading worship, exegesis, systematics, history—all will be in vain unless you go about it with your head and heart fixed on Jesus Christ. We want to grow into the devotion the psalmist voiced: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps 73:25–26).

We have to work at this together. That’s why St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, it’s “not that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers,” coworkers with you for your faith. “Faith” is a slippery word, easily misunderstood. One of the goals that you must have at the Seminary is to learn to explain theological jargon in a way that people can understand. Faith means hanging on to the promises of God, hanging on to his promises for dear life, because your life literally depends upon the promises of God to you in Jesus Christ. You have only one soul and it is precious. Your life literally depends upon what we’re talking about here. As we work together for faith, students, faculty, staff—and I stress again that we must all work together at this because faith is the most important thing for your soul and for mine—we will be a community than can be characterized as “Helpers of Joy.” Dr. Martin Luther beautifully described faith and joy in his Preface to the Romans.

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith.

So let me wrap up by going back to the picture of an aircraft carrier. I’m inviting you to come with us, come experience a gospel-dominated culture, come contribute to a culture based on Jesus, the “yes” to all God’s promises, come onboard the USS *Concordia*. What is the mission of an aircraft carrier? Don’t come up with military jargon and, please, no theologizing about war and two kingdoms. Just plain layman talk. What is the mission of an aircraft carrier? Isn’t it to launch airplanes? (Thanks to Rev. Tim Klinkenberg for this illustration.)

It’s not to stand around and talk about the superstructure of the ship. It’s not to get into endless theological debates about what the hangar below deck looks like or whether you can trust the radar. The mission of an aircraft carrier is to launch planes. Welcome to Concordia! You’re here to be launched into a world that desperately needs Jesus Christ. You are here to be launched as Helpers of Joy! Yes, sir? Yes, sir! Amen.

Dale A. Meyer  
President